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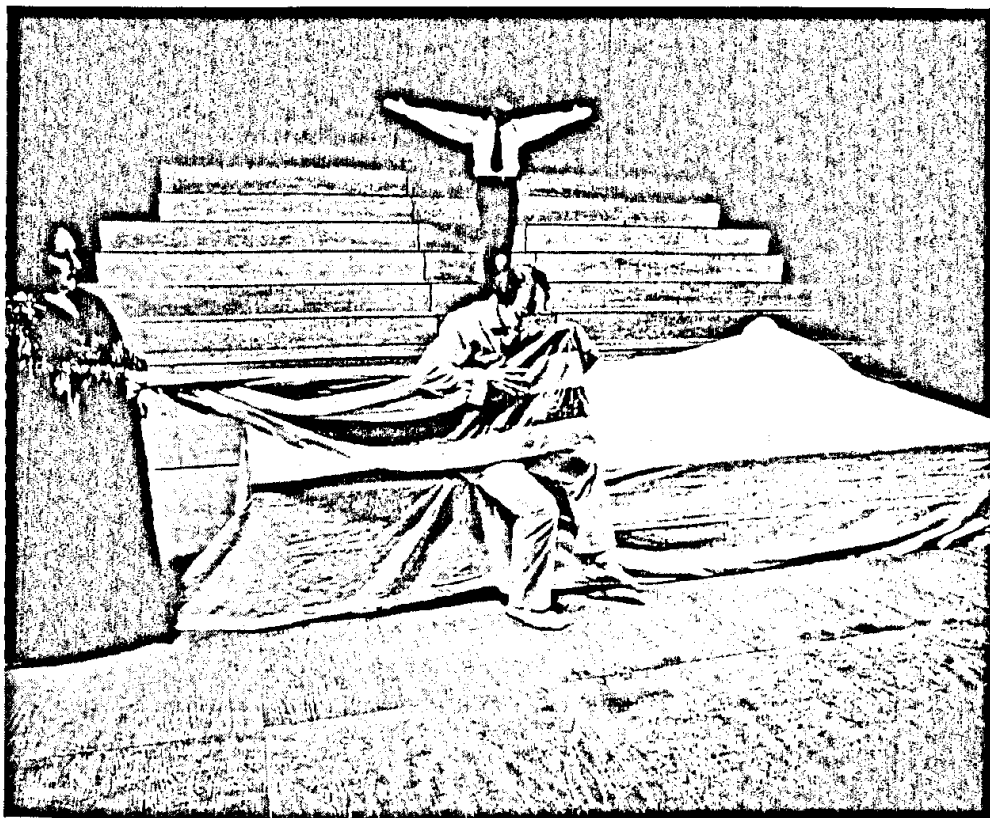


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Ubú President
Courtesy of Els Joglars

National Theater / National Identity: Els Joglars and the Question of Cultural Politics in Catalonia¹

Sharon Feldman
University of Kansas



In June 1996, at a private ceremony held in Barcelona at the Palau de la Generalitat de Catalunya (Palace of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia), amid the pomp, circumstance, and political rhetoric customarily associated with state occasions, I watched with awe and curiosity as the president of Catalonia Jordi Pujol bestowed the Creu de Sant Jordi, his nation's most coveted medal of honor, upon a distinguished group of men and women whose accomplishments extend from the spheres of art and music to business and athletics. The prestigious Creu was established in 1982, in Pujol's words, "to pay public homage to those who have contributed to the promotion and exhalation of the civic and cultural values of Catalonia," and among this year's most deserving recipients were several theater professionals: the companies Comediants and Dagoll Dagom, director/critic Ricard Salvat i Ferré, and, perhaps, most intriguingly, actress Carlota Soldevila, one of Catalonia's most extraordinary performers, who delivered a moving acceptance speech on behalf of all forty-two 1996 award recipients. Soldevila spoke of the censorship and suppression of her culture that she and her colleagues had endured under Franco and the revitalization and re-legitimation of that culture in democratic times. Indeed, since Franco's death in 1975, the theater has played a significant role in reconstructing and remapping the cultural identity of this region. Correspondingly, the (re)constitution of Catalonia as a nation within the Spanish state is an issue that has occupied a central position in the work of director Albert Boadella and his theater company Els Joglars. In the essay that follows, I shall use Els Joglars as

¹ I wish to express my appreciation to Ricard Salvat and Els Joglars (especially Albert Boadella and Quico Amorós). This study would not have been possible without their immense generosity. Partial funding for the research for this study was provided by the Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Generalitat de Catalunya), the Hall Center for the Humanities, and the General Research Fund of the University of Kansas.

a point of departure in order to illustrate how contemporary Catalan politics and culture—especially theater—often converge in paradoxical ways.

Throughout the 1990s, the size of theater audiences in Catalonia has been steadily on the rise and the theater scene in Barcelona is today as energetic as ever. Statistics gathered by the *Associació d'Empreses de Teatre de Catalunya* (Adetca) indicate that, in 1995, more than one and a half million spectators attended the theater, and it is projected that this number will continue to grow at an estimated rate of seven percent annually (Pérez de Olaguer).² Between 1990 and 1995, the amount of public funding designated for theater in the city of Barcelona alone was well over two hundred fifty million dollars (de la Torre 6). The Generalitat (President Pujol and his centrist coalition *Convergència i Unió*) has just invested approximately eighty-million dollars in the construction of the palatial *Teatre Nacional de Catalunya* (TNC), a massive structure which opened its doors in November 1996 near the *plaça de les Glòries*.³ The TNC is part of Barcelona's new, "post-Olympian" cultural configuration which, in the realm of theater, includes several majestic and visually impressive architectural undertakings.

At the opposite end of the city, atop Montjuic, construction is well underway on the multi-million *Ciutat del Teatre* complex, a "theater city," coordinated by the internationally renowned director Lluís Pasqual and financed primarily with funding from Barcelona's municipal and provincial governments (both of which are presently controlled by the Catalan Socialist party). When completed, the *Ciutat del Teatre* will include the new *Fundació Teatre Lliure-Teatre Públic*, located in the revamped *Palau de l'Agricultura* and rumored to have a construction budget of approximately fifty million dollars; the *Institut del Teatre*, Barcelona's newly-modernized theater conservatory; the *Mercat de les Flors*, specializing in international productions, with a spectacular rotunda painted by Miquel Barceló; the *Teatre Grec*, a luxurious outdoor Greek-style theater and

² According to Gonzalo Pérez de Olaguer, a study carried out by Line Staff Consulting (at the request of the Generalitat's Departament de Cultura) indicates that theater attendance in Catalonia rose 12.4% in 1985, 13.9% in 1991, and 18.1% in 1996.

³ It should be noted that the Generalitat already subsidizes its own drama center, the *Centre Dramàtic de la Generalitat de Catalunya* (CDGC), established in 1980 in the historic *Teatre Romea* and presently under the administration of Domènec Reixach. See Ricard Salvat, "El teatro catalán: ¿Una llama que se apaga?" and "Som a Burundi o a la Comunitat Europea? 2a. part" on the present political configuration of public theater in the city of Barcelona.

centerpiece of the Barcelona summer festival; and the Palau dels Esports, a remnant of the 1992 Olympic Games.

The conditions may appear sumptuous, especially on a visual level; nevertheless, the details are rather incongruous. While government expenditures on theater at both regional and municipal levels in Catalonia are most certainly lavish, fated to inspire envy on the part of citizens living in other parts of Spain (especially Madrid), the distribution of public funds has already inspired controversy within Catalonia itself and the distinction between public and private theater is not always entirely clear. The TNC, in particular, is a project that has been enveloped in debate and discussion from the moment of its inception. The building, designed by internationally-recognized Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill, is an imposing edifice of glass and marble that one could easily categorize as postmodern Greek revival. In the Barcelona press, "monumental" is the word that is most often used to describe it, as though the building itself were capable of visually affirming and reaffirming the presence and experience of Catalan nationalism. It is actually a theater complex containing two performance spaces, large and small (equipped to accommodate nine hundred and five hundred spectators, respectively), and while it may be spectacular on a visual level, there is a growing fear among members of the Barcelona theater community that, when all is said and done, the spectacularity of the gesture —the grandiose façade— may be all that remains. As director Joan Ollé commented in a recent interview in Barcelona's daily *La Vanguardia*, "Lo que sucede con el Teatre Nacional consiste únicamente en proteger el teatro catalán de él mismo: sólo se hacen obras de extranjeros. Y se invierte en la máquina, no en el producto.... Hoy se funciona por el capricho de los gestores y políticos. Hasta Jordi Pujol comentó que el TNC era como un vestido grande para un niño muy pequeño" (80). Ollé's critical perspective, and that of many others, is fueled by a widespread uneasiness regarding the Generalitat's potential manipulation of culture as a way of exalting its own political (i.e., nationalist) sentiments —a concern that is likely foreshadowed by all-too-recent memories of the Franco regime and its cultural-propagandistic undertakings. Ricard Salvat, the above-mentioned recipient of the Creu de Sant Jordi, hints at the presence of political opportunism on the part of both the right (TNC) and the left (Ciutat del Teatre) when he declares: "Si un partido lleva a cabo un proyecto megalomaniaco, el otro procura hacerlo aún más desmesurado" ("El teatro catalán").

Intertwined with the problem of cultural politics and partisanship is the inevitable concern that economic interests may ultimately overshadow creative endeavors. A public theater, many believe, should be not only a platform upon which to exhibit the classical and contemporary repertoire of a nation's artistic offerings, but also a place where one can take creative and/or economic risks with

little or no heed to commercial success.⁴ A public theater, according to this view, could be a place that would replenish the empty spaces that commercial and private theaters are unable to fill. However, despite the Generalitat's colossal financial investments, a proportionally small amount of public support is set aside for individual Catalan playwrights, directors, and private companies. (This is one place where the boundaries between public and private become somewhat obscure: several private companies —such as La Fura del Baus, Comediants, Dagoll Dagom, La Cubana, and Talleret de Salt— regularly receive annual subventions from the Generalitat.⁵) Many critics attribute the privileging of the theaters (the physical buildings and the abstract “institutions”) over the artists to a lack of foresight on the part of the Generalitat, a situation that does not augur well for the future of Catalan theater. Speculating with regard to the thousands of seats now available at the TNC and at other Barcelona theater venues, critic Albert de la Torre, posed the following rhetorical question in a recent editorial in *Escena*: “I què s’hi farà aquí dintre?” (“What on earth will go on inside?”). De la Torre was touching on a very deep problem because “what is going on inside,” it would seem, is seldom the work of new and/or living Catalan dramatists.

In a rather foreboding gesture that inspired great dissatisfaction among a large sector of Barcelona's theater community, Josep Maria Flotats was appointed director of programming and of the resident company that was to inhabit the TNC. Flotats, a vastly talented actor/director and favorite of the Catalan *bourgeoisie*, is best known for his work in Paris with the Comédie Française and with his own commercially successful company, which was based at Barcelona's publicly funded Teatre Poliorama from 1985 to 1994.⁶ In *La Vanguardia*, he defined the TNC as “el Barca del teatro Catalán” and assured everyone that his supreme desire, and that of the Generalitat, was to give Catalonia a “luminous

⁴ On the controversy surrounding the question of public theater in Catalonia, see the collection of diverse opinions appearing in a recent issue of *Escena* (November 1996) (“Puntos de vista: ¿Qué teatro público”), as well as the articles by Salvat, Jordi Teixidor, Jaume Melendres, Jaume Comas, and Jaume Nadal appearing in *Entreacte*.

⁵ In June 1996, several private Catalan companies formed an organization known as the Associació de Companyies de Teatre Professional de Catalunya (Ciatre), designed to negotiate a better relationship between the public and private sectors: “defender el ‘teatro como creación artesanal y establecer una plataforma conjunta para dialogar con los agentes públicos de la cultura’” (Fondevila).

⁶ See Joan-Anton Benach, Xavier Fàbregas, David George and John London, and María José Ragué Arias for overviews of contemporary Catalan theater history.

cultural center," similar to the Comédie Française, the Piccolo Teatro of Milan, and "the Shakespeare Theater of London." Flotats, however, never really proposed a clear policy with regard to the implementation of a national theater. In a treatise titled *Un projecte per al Teatre Nacional* (1989), published with prefaces by Pujol himself and Barcelona Mayor Pasqual Maragall, he attempted to outline his conception of "Un teatre de tots, per a tots, al servei de tots" (25), and his view of the TNC as a public service enterprise, necessary for the expression of a Catalan cultural identity: "Ha d'aportar, a imatge de les grans institucions culturals europees, una mostra de la tradició i de l'art teatral català" (32). However, Flotats's treatise did not express a clear artistic vision regarding the type of programming that he would offer at the TNC. In his work at the Poliorama, he privileged international drama above Catalan theater, and this is a fact that has certainly cast an ominous shadow upon his present role as director of the TNC.

Throughout 1996, Flotats was ridiculed by the press when he reportedly camped out in the TNC for months prior to its opening in order to acclimate his body and soul to their new surrounding karma. The controversy and indignation over his appointment was further augmented by the disclosure that he had been given complete and exclusive autonomy with regard to all programming decisions, as well as his own stable company of actors. Rumors about his salary, which has never been disclosed publicly, have also enhanced the controversy. In effect, the Catalan theater community at large was not invited to participate in the "construction" of their own cultural identity and of their national theater, a project which many had long desired and imagined would finally be possible with the advent of democracy in Spain. Salvat emphasizes the concern with safeguarding the opportunity to perform Catalan theater (not just theater in Catalan).

Fernando Pessoa decía que su patria era su lengua y la mayoría de catalanes pensamos un poco así. Para los que estamos convencidos que el poeta portugués llevaba razón, el teatro en catalán es algo fundamental para nuestra identidad, para nuestro futuro dentro de una Europa de nacionalidades, sin los centralismos castradores que la mayoría de comunidades culturales minoritarias de Europa han sufrido. ("El teatro catalán")

Salvat's commentary appears brutally ironic when considered alongside the revelation that the first play Flotats chose to stage at the TNC was a North American work, Tony Kushner's award-winning *Angels in America*, adapted into Catalan by Josep Costa. The première, in November 1996, in a makeshift performance space, situated behind the two unfinished theaters, was heralded

with cries of public outrage in the Barcelona press by those who insisted that it was inappropriate to inaugurate Catalonia's national theater with an American play. Playwright Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, to cite just one example, published the following reproach in the Catalan supplement of *El País* (9 September 1996):

Lo que pido, lo que prácticamente exigiría a los responsables pertinentes de la Generalitat de Catalunya, es que... hagan el favor de continuar en la misma línea y coloquen una placa en la entrada del nuevo local con el fin de que, para siempre jamás... todo el mundo pueda recordar con emoción y lágrimas en los ojos que el Teatre Nacional de Catalunya se puso en marcha con *Angels in America* del gran autor americano Tony Kushner.... Quiero esa placa. Preferentemente en inglés para que la pueda entender todo el mundo. (Rpt. in Castilian in *Escena* 13-14)

Eventually, the polemic concerning Kushner's work took an additional ironic turn when the Catalan *bourgeois* conservatives aligned with Pujol's centrist government realized that *Angels in America* is, on one level, a disdainful examination of their own right-wing politics. Flotats, in effect, had made a rather venturesome move in choosing to stage such an unequivocally political play, which candidly confronts the problem of AIDS and the issue of homosexuality, when his greatest supporters were most likely expecting to see a more traditional theater piece. The production, which included a prestigious cast (Pere Arquillué, Montserrat Carulla, Ramon Madaula, Sílvia Munt, Francesc Orella, and Josep Maria Pou) ran at the TNC until April 1997 and was seen in Barcelona by approximately 13,000 spectators before touring Spain in its Castilian version.

Following *Angels in America*, Catalan taxpayers witnessed the première at their national theater of the Broadway musical *Company*, by Stephen Sondheim and George Furth. By the spring of 1997, the outrage certainly did not diminish when Flotats, apparently trying to appease his critics, announced that the "official inauguration" of the "Sala Gran" of the TNC would take place on 11 September 1997 (Catalonia's National day) with the première of a classic —albeit, rather unexciting— Catalan play, Santiago Rusiñol's *L'auca del senyor Esteve*. Whom did Flotats choose to direct the Rusiñol play? Adolfo Marsillach, a Catalan director who has spent the greater part of his artistic career in Madrid (most recently, as director of the Teatro Nacional de la Comedia). Comediants, one of the most celebrated Catalan companies, is scheduled to inaugurate the "Sala Petita" with the première of a new spectacle, titled *Tempus* in October 1997.

In July 1997, Catalan Minister (*Conseller*) of Culture Joan Maria Pujals, under pressure from Adetca and the Associació de Companyies de Teatre Professional de Catalunya (Ciatre) announced the imposition of a quota whereby

private theater and dance companies would occupy thirty-five percent of programming at the TNC. A committee comprised of members from both the public and private sectors has been appointed to coordinate “la programación entre el teatro privado y los teatros dependientes de la Generalitat” and establish a set of criteria that will permit a more harmonious relationship between these two ambiguously defined theater sectors. Additionally, Pujals stated that Flotats’s would no longer be entitled to his own company (Antón, “El Teatre Nacional” 8). One would hope that this news will one day be perceived as a *denouement* to this bizarre public drama, although, at the time of this writing, the future of Catalonia’s national theater is still enveloped in uncertainty.

Turning once again to Carlota Soldevila: it would be easy for us to conclude that, ostensibly, she received her Creu de Sant Jordi in recognition of her work with the Teatre Lliure, but we can only speculate in silence about whether President Pujol was aware of the ironic detail that, thirty-five years ago, she was also a founding member of the Catalan theater troupe Els Joglars, along with Anton Font and Albert Boadella. In light of the Joglars’s most recent spectacle *Ubú President*, Soldevila is probably the first and last member of this company who will ever wear the famous Creu.⁷ Els Joglars began as a collective in 1962 with the presentation of a series of non-verbal mime and pantomime works: *Mimodrames* (1965-1966) and *El diari* (1968) are the first titles in their trajectory. With these works, it created a visual language of performance, based on gesture and image, that M. Aurèlia Capmany called “un art del silenci i l’engrescament.” With this aesthetic of silence, Els Joglars forged its political commentaries in the tacit margins of what was unsaid and not permitted.⁸ Over time, with spectacles such as *El joc* (1970), *Cruel Ubris* (1972) and *Mary d’Ous* (1973), the group slowly and carefully incorporated sounds and words into its artistic expression. With the passage of more than three decades, the presentation of over fifteen different spectacles, several international tours, and many projects for Spanish and Catalan television, Els Joglars has gradually modified its aesthetic values, adjusting its point of attack in accordance with the most ardent political issues of any given moment. Today, in democratic times, it is no longer considered a radical “off, off” group; but rather, a firmly established professional

⁷ My descriptions of *Ubú President* are based on my attendance of rehearsals in Pruitt (August 1995), my attendance of a performance in Torelló (June 1996), and my reading of an unpublished Castilian version of the text.

⁸ On the historical trajectory of the company, see Joan Abellán, Francesc Burguet Ardiaca, Jill Lane, Lluís Racionero y Antoni Bartomeus, and Boadella’s prologue to the volume *Mester de joglaria*.

company, based in Pruit (Osona), which functions under the exclusive direction of Boadella. Despite external and internal changes, throughout its trajectory, Els Joglars has never turned its back on politics. On the contrary, it has always sustained a cardinal interest in the employment of theater as a means of protest, resistance, and social agitation.

In the tumultuous *curriculum vitae* of the eminently insolent Boadella and his Joglars, the moments in which real life has been confused with spectacle have emerged with extraordinary frequency: court martial, imprisonment, a dramatic escape from jail, flight into exile, subsequent amnesty, gun shots fired at a theater, knife wounds inflicted on an actor, bomb threats, and public remonstrations by a group of bishops are just some of the entries in this cv, which on occasion has occupied the front pages of the daily press. Such was the situation when the censorship of the spectacle *La Torna* (1977) converted this work and its incarcerated performers into heroic emblems of the battle for freedom of expression during Spain's democratic transition. (In fact, all the above-mentioned events took place during the post-Franco period.)

If there is a burning question that surfaces in practically all the creative work of Els Joglars, both within and beyond the spatio-temporal confines of the Franco dictatorship, it is the role that art (specifically theater) can and should play in the articulation of a cultural identity and the visual construction (and deconstruction) of a national culture. Els Joglars operates from a perspective that implicitly proposes the concept of nation as a performative space where what is emphasized is the *process* of fabrication and construction; nationality is thus conceived as a creative process and not as a sacred truth. Els Joglars's approach is, in effect, consonant with that of Benedict Anderson, who perceives the nation as an "imagined community" of fluctuating dimensions. In the same line of thought, Jill Lane indicates that, for Boadella, the problem of representing a nation through theater/performance is a question of "authority and strategy": who has the authority to affirm and decide what type representation is considered legitimate? (81). It is a question that, throughout modern Spanish history, and concretely in Catalonia, has taken many forms.

Boadella, who is also one of Flotats's most vehement critics, demonstrated his awareness of this problematic when, in 1989, the Generalitat de Catalunya announced its plans for the construction of the TNC. As a way of problematizing the notions of official cultural and national heritage that the Generalitat was attempting to promote, he announced, with a combination of sardonic irony and seriousness, that his company had officially changed its name to "Els Joglars-

Teatre Nacional de Catalunya" (Lane 81).⁹ Hence, in an act of resistance, Boadella appropriated the reigning hegemonic discourse and converted it into his own weapon of protest. In this manner, the Generalitat suddenly saw its own image bestowed with new meaning, reflected in a kind of *esperpentic* mirror. This is the same paradigm of resistance that Els Joglars manages in its creative endeavors. Whereas during the dictatorship, the company found in the expression of its Catalanism a way of opposing the oppressive centralization of the Franco Regime, during the democratic period, Els Joglars's appropriation and performance of Catalanism has evolved into a means of resisting the institutionalization of Catalan culture that President Pujol's autonomous government is currently attempting to impose. In his artistic trajectory as well as his public life, Boadella—a director, playwright, and actor—has been one of the most vocal skeptics with regard to the function of the Generalitat's opulent expenditures on public theater in a democratic society (and, incidentally, he no longer accepts the annual subvention from Catalonia's autonomous government). His prominent voice of skepticism and suspicion can be traced throughout virtually all the Joglars's post-Franco works, especially *M-7 Catalònia* (1978), *Olympic Man Movement* (1981), *Virtuosos de Fontainbleau* (1985), *Visanteta de Favara* (1986), *El Nacional* (1993), and, most recently, *Ubú President*. These are works that, in general, express an implicit consternation with regard to the Generalitat's fabrication of an official cultural politic that will serve to propagate its nationalistic views. More specifically, these works offer a critique of what Lane (paraphrasing Louis Althusser) calls, the "reinvention of the theatre as Catalan ideological state apparatus" (81).

Ubú President, conceived and directed by Boadella, continues to cultivate the Joglars' long-standing interest in the provocative and subversive powers of visual imagery, music, gesture, and laughter. It is a mordant Jarryesque satire that expresses the company's displeasure with President Pujol and his excessive brand of nationalist politics. (The première also coincided with the one hundredth anniversary of the première of Jarry's *Ubu roi* in 1896). It is also a work that implicitly addresses the role that a political theater can play in contributing to the definition of cultural identity within the context of a contemporary democratic system. While on the one hand, the Joglars uphold and embrace the Catalan language and culture, they also condemn its institutionalization (Lane 82-83). They do not pose solutions; rather, they are situated at a paradoxical and slippery crossroads where two faces of nationalism appear to intersect. Nationalism is,

⁹ On this polemic, see also Boadella's interview with Burguet Ardiaca, "Qui té la clau del TNC —Albert Boadella, la rehòstia!"

according to Terry Eagleton, always a dialogical *affaire* between the universal and the particular. Ironically, “a politics of difference or specificity” can swiftly generate into one of “sameness and universal identity” (30). Boadella appears to understand the hazards of this treacherous *affaire*, and in *Ubú President*, he sets out to disrobe the most guilty players.

Ubú President premiered in Girona in October 1995, and not only is it Els Joglars’s most widely-acclaimed spectacle to date; it is also one of the great success stories of the 1995/96/97 Spanish theater seasons. It continued to tour Spain until May 1997, reaching a total of 275,000 spectators. Like all the Joglar’s productions, it participates in a burlesque/carnavalesque tradition that views the stage as a space for transgression, risk, cruelty, provocation, rage, obscenity, scatology, sacrilege, abrasive satire, and cathartic parody (Burget Ardiaca). For Boadella, these characteristics are also distinctly Mediterranean—that is, Catalan (Racionero 169-70). He aims to wound one’s sensibilities, and if, in so doing, he is able to entertain, so much the better. With *Ubú President*, Boadella returns by “hygienic necessity” (as he puts it) to the Ubu theme of an earlier piece, *Operació Ubú*, which he produced with the company of the Teatre Lliure in 1981. On one level, *Ubú President* represents his way of “exorcising his demons,” of expressing his displeasure with President Pujol (sarcastically referred to in the play as “Excels”), his centrist coalition (aptly known—in real life—as “Convergència i Unió”), and the Generalitat’s intemperate strain of nationalism, which propagates an exalted image of Catalanism. In reference to *Ubu President* Boadella offered the following commentary in the Spanish daily *El País*:

Escribí esta obra porque ya no puedo más con el nacionalismo del señor Pujol. Estoy harto de que la palabra Cataluña se pronuncie tres mil veces al día en nuestra televisión autonómica. Estoy harto de que en esa misma televisión salga Pujol cada diez minutos para reñirnos porque no somos todos los buenos catalanes que deberíamos ser: sólo le falta enseñarnos a mear a la catalana. Estoy harto de vivir en un estado de excepción permanente del que, supuestamente tiene la culpa el enemigo exterior, los españoles. Estoy harto de que me recuerden constantemente la suerte que tengo de ser catalán, porque los catalanes somos los mejores del mundo. Estoy harto de que los intelectuales... y otros cerebros privilegiados, reinventen la historia de este país como mejor conviene a quien les paga... Estoy harto de muchas cosas, y trato de hacerles frente con la única arma que tengo, el teatro. (Antón, “Boadella” 86)

It was a fortuitous coincidence for Boadella and his Joglars that the première of *Ubú President* in October 1995 coincided with the most intense period of the

presidential election campaign in Catalonia. Pujol eventually won re-election by a small margin. However, had he lost, Els Joglars indeed may have been credited with toppling his campaign. In the week following the première, TV-3, the Catalan channel, televised a presidential debate between Pujol and the other candidates, and during the debate, one of the left-wing candidates, Rafael Ribó, made an ironic reference to *Ubú President*, addressing Pujol as “l’Excels” (Tordera). The incident made headlines in the press, and stands as a testament to the role that the theater continues to play in the cultural and political life of this region.

For Boadella and the Joglars, as for many other Catalans on the left as well as the right, Pujol’s inflated view of himself and his nation is an isolationist, limiting, and damaging perspective. Catalan nationalism, understood here as a regional nationalist movement born at the end of the nineteenth century, is underpinned by an emancipatory drive to assert one’s political, social, economic, psychological and cultural independence and/or identity. As Joan-Lluís Marfany points out in a recent study titled *La cultura del catalanisme*, the notion of *catalanisme* (often, synonymous with Catalan nationalism) can only exist as a function of a fundamental opposition that posits Spain as the State and Catalonia as the nation (the well-known “fet diferencial”).¹⁰ *Catalanisme*, as practiced by the Joglars during the Franco years (in which they opted for silence and gesture as strategies of political protest and commitment), signified a move against censorship and the oppressive centralization of the Regime. Yet, paradoxically, post-Franco times and the reconfiguration of Spain as an *estado autonómico* have revealed the other face of the nationalist dialectic: a suppression and concealment of individuality and an exhalation of what Boadella perceives to be a parasitic, opportunistic, commercialized, homogenized culture that operates at the service of government institutions. (The parallels with Francoism here should be obvious.) Regionalist nationalism, such as that of Pujol (so-called *Pujolisme*), may at first appear to promote and defend difference, but then it appears to fulfill Eagleton’s hypothesis. It turns around and attempts to smother any discourse of resistance, such as that of the Joglars, which stands in the way of the cultural images and patriotic ideals that it wishes to project.

In the performance of *Ubú President*, ten actors interpret over ninety-five different situations and fifty different characters within a nearly empty space. Through a highly polished technique of voice and movement, they are able to construct through their physical presence the walls and rooms of a fictional

¹⁰ See Peter Alter on the concept of regional nationalism and Valentí Almirall, Albert Balcells, and Joan Lluís Marfany on the case of Catalonia in particular.

presidential palace where Excels works (from seven in the morning to midnight) and lives with his wife, Excelsa. Ramón Fontseré's incarnation of Pujol/Excels is infinitely humorous and truly masterful, especially if one considers that the actor is probably twice the size of the diminutive real-life double whose essence he has captured. Body guards and members of the president's cabinet, deputies from the Catalan parliament, journalists from Catalan television (TV-3, here, known as "TV-Res," or, in the Castilian version, "TV-Estrés"), cleaning women, politicians, and even England's Queen Mother are just some of the characters and stereotypes who make an appearance on stage.

The Ubuësqe protagonist, "Excels," has problems (as does the real Pujol) making himself understood during his public speaking engagements. The only words that he seems to enunciate correctly are "Catalunya" and "Català." In order to remedy his verbal neuroses and his public image, he seeks the help of one doctor Oriol, a famed psychoanalyst. Oriol encourages Excels to act out and expel his inner fears, desires, passions, and ghosts through a technique of psychodrama. When he enters this dimension of psychodrama, Excels, in a manner similar to Jarry's absurdist invention, envisions himself as king of Poland (with Excelsa, as queen), the Pope ("Jordi Chiquitín Primero"), and even God ("God and father of all Catalans," he declares, as he swings like a trapeze artist from the modernist Gaudí lamp in his office). In these metatheatrical scenes, the actors employ the same extraordinary leather masks and grotesque costumes that the late Fabià Puigserver designed for the 1981 production. Unfortunately, for Excels, his fictional hallucinations begin to infiltrate and contaminate reality and vice versa, blurring the distinction between theater and life (something that the Joglars, in effect, are already doing on an even larger scale). Hence his therapy only yields further confusion and embarrassment.

The strategy of resistance that Els Joglars employs in *Ubú President* is designed to imbue the spectator with incertitude, creating an unstable parodic space that resists an exact repetition (or representation) of the truth. It is a technique of mimicry, derived in part from the group's early experiences with political pantomime. Mimicry, as conceived by Elin Diamond, is a distortion of mimesis, a form of performance that produces an "ironic disturbance." In *Ubú President*, Els Joglars employs mimicry as a way of creating an ironic disturbance that will place into question the visual representation of Catalanism. The scenes that most effectively display this strategy are those in which Els Joglars insidiously manipulates and mimics the emblems of nationalism and patriotism which historically have contributed to the construction of a "universal" (Eagleton's term) Catalan identity. It is a form of mimicry that presents a visual image that is—in Homi Bhabha's words, "almost the same, but not quite." Through performance, the Joglars's mimic representations ("almost the same, but

not quite") at once reinforce and undermine the notions of nation and nationalism by creating an ambivalent zone of slippage between "the real" and the copy.

For example, there is the dream sequence in which Excels receives a mysterious visit in the middle of the night from a voluptuous diva known as "la Montse," a parodic version of Montserrat Caballé, who sings him an operatic lullaby and envelops him in a Catalan flag that also serves as a blanket. For the audience, it is clear that "la Montse" bears a striking resemblance to the "real" Caballé, but she also bears a visual likeness to the Andalusian cleaning woman who works for Excels and Excelsa at the presidential palace. She is, in effect, portrayed by the same actress, Begoña Alberdi; hence the exalted visual image of the distinguished soprano is ghosted and undermined by that of an immigrant servant. In a key non-verbal visual *tableau*, Excels plays with a giant inflated globe in an ironic quotation of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940). The red and blue colors of the Barça football team are seen, emblazoned on his sock, as he kicks the globe into the air.

An exemplary version of the scatological humor that runs throughout the play is revealed in the episode that takes place in the men's lavatory of the Catalan parliament in which Excels engages in a clandestine meeting with his deputies in order to devise a strategy that will subvert the opposition (I quote from the Castilian script): "Escuchad... Si me pongo el bolígrafo en la oreja, abstención. Si me pongo el bolígrafo en la nariz, voto negativo, ¿eh?." When Excels accidentally and emblematically soils himself with his own urine, he asks one of the deputies to exchange trousers with him, a problematic request that is complicated by the fact that the president is much too short to wear another man's pants.

In the final scene, Excels gives a presidential speech atop Montserrat in which the most sacred icon of Catalan culture, the famous "black" virgin known as "La Moreneta," is so bored by his incomprehensible political gibberish that she drops the famous ball that she has held in her hands for centuries. As a culminating point, and most significantly, the performance is topped off by a perfectly executed *sardana*, danced by the actors in their final *salute* to the audience.. The gesture is not an innocent one, since this is an absolutely politicized *sardana* that is consistent with the Joglars's vision of the nation as an imagined and charismatic space.

In developing his concept of nation as narration, Homi Bhabha speaks of an inherent tension between what he calls the "pedagogical" and the "performative." The people of a nation are at once manipulated objects of an historically authoritarian nationalist pedagogy, while at the same time, they are charismatic subjects who engage in a simultaneous erasure of the mythic patriotic politics that have been inscribed on their bodies (297). *Ubú President* exposes this

"ambivalent intersection" (Bhabha's term) where the spatial and temporal conceptions of nation are at once inscribed through historical reference and erased through performance. In a key moment, Excels turns to his Mallorcan cleaning women and tells her in a condescending tone, "you are just as Catalan as I." (He also repeats the same phrase while conversing with his secretary from Perpignan.) Boadella has reproduced a common cliché, historically intended to signify Catalonia's all-inclusive acceptance of the immigrant "other." Here, though, the cliché is rendered all the more ironic since Mallorca is actually considered part of the *Paisos Catalans*, or, Catalan territories. Els Joglars, in this manner, has inverted the cliché; it's meaning is unraveled within the performative context of the play so that all-inclusive acceptance becomes an oppressive attempt to define and empower through colonization.

The impeccable *sardana* that is presented at the end of the performance serves as a kind of recapitulatory synopsis of the process through which the Joglars has inserted itself within the nationalist dialectic. The *sardana* is a traditional dance, historically appropriated by *catalanistes* as a symbol of their patriotic spirit. Yet, it is important to note here that the *sardana* is danced during the curtain call of *Ubú President*, in the margin between performance and real life, when the performers are no longer "in character." Thus, from the point of view of the spectator, it is not, for example, Excels and Excelsa (or, their real-life doubles Jordi Pujol and his wife Marta Ferrusola) who are dancing; but rather, it is the Joglars (i.e., actors Ramón Fontseré and Pilar Sanz) who have appropriated the official pedagogical side of nationalism and used it to perform and legitimize their own dance of cultural identity on the Catalan stage.

During the rehearsals of *Ubú President*, Boadella insisted that his group dance an absolutely perfect *sardana*, that what they were dancing was, in fact, a "sardana política." He apparently wanted to obscure the difference between mimesis and mimicry in order to achieve the desired effect. Here, the line between subversion and simple repetition is a very fine subtlety, but the effect is similar to that which Boadella achieved when he appropriated the title "Teatre Nacional de Catalunya" for his company. Like that mirror image of Catalan nationalism that was imbued with new meaning, *Ubú President* offers a representation of nationalism that, at first glance, appears to be an exact copy of its pedagogical face. Then, the face is turned around to reveal its alternative "performative" side. In this manner, Els Joglars has used this alternative face to legitimize through performance their own dance of cultural identity on the Catalan stage, and also, within the larger frame of Spain's current theatrical landscape.

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